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Jarvis, P. (2017) Book Review: *Policy for Play: responding to children's forgotten right*. Adrian Voce. Policy Press, 2015. 978-1-4473-1942-9. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. (In press).

**Book Title: Policy for Play: responding to children's forgotten right**

**Authors: Adrian Voce**

**Publisher and Date: Policy Press, 2015**

**Number of pages: 188**

**ISBN number: 978-1-4473-1942-9**

**Dr Pam Jarvis**

**Leeds Trinity University**

This is clearly an important book which attempts to answer a fundamental question: *can* governments effectively legislate and make policy for play? As Roger Hart says in his foreword: 'this book needed to be written' (Voce 2015, p.XV). I was very interested to hear what Voce had to say on this topic, given the difficulty in actually defining 'play' in the first place. The dichotomy involved in attempting to legislate for an activity that changes dramatically in the process of becoming controlled is also an issue; the ephemeral nature of play, what it is and what it is not: 'where an individual reports that they were playing, they probably were' (Jarvis 2014, p.8).

We have seen the vast controversies that have arisen as children's learning activities have been increasingly curriculumised and controlled by subsequent governments in pursuit of 'quality' provision, based upon children's fundamental right of reaching 'the highest level of education of which they are capable' (Article 28 United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child, UNICEF 2016, online). How play would therefore be dealt with through this same policy-for-rights machine was a question I was very intrigued to explore through reading 'Policy for Play'.

In this respect, Voce does not disappoint. He manages to convey the dazzling complexity of policy moving through endless layers of government; the fragile but substantial funding streams that sometimes entice well intentioned professionals with substantial sums of money for activities that had previously been resourced on a shoestring, only for finance to vapourise into dust when policy changes; the difficulty of communicating with politicians and civil servants about topics that are completely alien to them, but over which they have enormous power. Voce also poignantly describes the worldly agendas that government bring to bear on policy creation: 'the play movement's voice was small within a burgeoning industry that was being subsidised by the taxpayer, not for all the rhetoric, to improve the quality of children's lives, so much as to allow their parents to go to work' (Voce 2015, p.65). So much for the rights-based approach premised upon for children to engage in 'relaxation and play' (UNCRC Article 32, UNCRC 2016, online), then.

At the end of this book, I felt that I had further developed my reflections upon the frequently toxic impact of economy-driven neo-liberal policy creation upon the lives of children and their families, producing an increasingly controlled and regulated social environment. However, the sheer complexity of the process that Voce describes becomes the source of the book's greatest drawback. In places the narrative of events is not organised in a 'reader friendly' fashion; in particular, Voce uses so many acronyms that the reader gets lost in resulting maze and consequently, becomes prone to losing the point he is trying to make. These acronyms are translated at the beginning of the book, but the text is so swamped

with them that the reader has to keep turning back and forth, which makes it difficult to follow the author's narrative.

The overall message that is communicated is that a small band of middle class professionals made a significant amount of money from New Labour's play policy, but in the end, very little changed for the children themselves. While this is a frustrating outcome, particularly for the adults who entered the process with many good intentions, it is nevertheless an important event to place within the historical record, and this book is certainly effective in this respect. It would however have been improved by wider reflection on the 'policy for play' experience in the context of the other key national policy for children, that of education, and the toxic impact of neo-liberal 'market' dominance within both agendas. This level of analysis is however not in evidence, and Voce still appears optimistic that legislation may indeed be the answer, if adults would only allow space: 'for children to be children... in a world that protects and supports their right to play' (Voce 2015, p.155).

Unfortunately, the key question relating to *how* this is to happen within the current political milieu in England is not subsequently explored in this book.

Overall, then, this book provides a useful beginning from which we might begin to discuss the prospect of a subsequent 'policy for play'. It appears from the experiences that Voce narrates that nations might be unwise to legislate for 'play' from a neo-liberal basis in the simplistic way attempted by the New Labour government 1997-2010. In order to consider policy for play in the round, we need to put the independence and creativity that is inherent in deep play activity into the centre of our considerations and from such a starting point, attempt to unpick the

complex societal factors that have impacted upon an activity that children once undertook collaboratively and spontaneously in ways that were largely invisible to the adults that otherwise directed their everyday lives (Jarvis 2007). Voce introduces some of the factors that need to be considered within such a meta-analysis, for example urban planning, adults having sufficient family time at home, less media 'hype' about children, young people and parenting, and a different cultural construction of childhood, that of an integral life stage rather than simply as a launch pad for economically active adulthood.

The fact that this book has ignited this type of reflective process in my own mind indicates to me that it is an important resource for all professionals and academics who are interested in policy for play, particularly from a children's rights perspective. I would recommend it to readers who are interested in children's play and leisure, and further hope that this book will be the first of many in a process which moves on to thoroughly discuss, analyse and deconstruct this fundamental childhood studies topic, in terms of both policy and practice.

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